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TAGS: PREL MARR PBTS ETRD OSCE GG RS
SUBJECT: GEORGIA-RUSSIA: SOME POSITIVE STEPS -- AND SOME
RED LINES

REF: MOSCOW 3202

Classified By: A/DCM Kirk Augustine. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶11. (C) Summary. Russian MFA Fourth CIS Department Director Andrey Kelin told A/DCM April 4 that he was pleased with the "good cooperative spirit" he had met in Tbilisi when finalizing the agreement on withdrawing Russian bases by 2008 that was signed in Sochi March 31. The March 27 South Ossetia JCC meeting in Vladikavkaz had also been "positive," and would be followed by an early-May JCC meeting in Tskhinvali. An "accumulation" of positive experiences could,

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if proved to be "stable," lead to rescheduling the visit of Georgian PM Noghaideli for late spring/early summer. However, Russia had two red lines that, if crossed, would undercut any positive scenario: 1) a Georgian demand that Russian peacekeepers have visas -- Kelin used Kosovo as a precedent for rejecting that demand; and 2) seeking to revise the 1994 agreement setting up the peace process and peacekeeping mechanisms for South Ossetia. On the current ban on imports of wine from Georgia and Moldova, Kelin said technical talks could begin with Georgia as early as next week, once the Ministry of Health finished talks with the Moldovans and the Georgians sent a delegation from Tbilisi. End Summary.

The Positive Signs...

¶12. (C) A/DCM sought a readout from Kelin, the DAS-equivalent who heads the Caucasus directorate, after Kelin's visit to the region last week. Kelin said the base withdrawal agreement (based on a May 30, 2005 bilateral declaration) was finalized in Tbilisi in a "good cooperative spirit." The agreement was signed March 31, but the Russians "understandably did not give it much attention in the media." Kelin continued to Baku to negotiate an agreement to withdraw equipment by rail through Azerbaijan. That gave the logisticians the option of using sea or rail shipping to withdraw the equipment returning to Russia, and Kelin expected both to be used. Kelin said Russia hoped there would be no problems with Georgian observance of the agreement's condition that until the withdrawal is completed Georgia provide, as a March 31 MFA statement put it, "normal conditions for the functioning of the military bases" (e.g., in terms of visas and movement). There had been no incidents in that regard since early February, Kelin said.

¶13. (U) Note. A "Krasnaya Zvezda" article of April 4 set out some of the provisions of the agreement, noting that a joint Russian-Georgian commission working in Tbilisi would oversee fulfillment of the agreement's obligations and resolve contentious issues. The agreement is to be in effect until the end of 2008, unless one of the parties gives notice

through diplomatic channels of a substantial breach of its terms by the other side, in which case implementation would cease within 30 days. The article concluded that, "especially taking into account the experience of the first stage of Russian troop withdrawal, the process of withdrawal from bases in Georgia will hardly be easy." End Note

¶14. (C) The March 27 South Ossetia Joint Coordination Council (JCC) meeting in Tskhinvali was similarly constructive, Kelin said. It produced positive results "for the first time:" an agreement to create a working group to draw up a 3-stage workplan based on the Saakashvili plan and the Kokoity initiative. The Georgian refusal to approve a statement on the non-use of force was "less positive." Kelin expected another meeting of the JCC to take place in Tskhinvali in early May.

¶15. (C) An "accumulation" of positive experiences could lead to the rescheduling of a visit by Georgian PM Noghaideli for late spring or early summer, Kelin said. The Georgians had proposed an early April date for such a visit, but that was "too early." It would first be necessary to confirm that the positive trend was "stable," and a visit at the PM level would require good preparation to ensure that it was productive, rather than a step backward. Noghaideli could discuss regional economic integration in the South Ossetia conflict, the topic on which his aborted visit was to have focused. A visit by someone on a slightly lower level might lead up to the PM's visit.

¶16. (C) Kelin also hoped that Georgia's new Abkhazia negotiator, Irakli Alasania, would visit Moscow in the near future; the Russians considered his new function, his meeting with Abkhaz leader Bagapsh, and their agreement to revive the Georgian-Abkhaz Coordination Council to be positive steps.

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...And the Less Positive

¶17. (C) Kelin foresaw two potential problems that could derail relations once again. The first was the Georgian demand that Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia obtain visas. Georgian DFM Antadze, during his late-February discussions with the MFA on the visa issue, had assured the GOR that the demand for PKF visas was off the table, but a diplomatic note from the Georgian MFA had just revived the issue. Kelin insisted that Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia should have the same status as peacekeepers in Kosovo: exemption from visas and from local jurisdiction. Russia was prepared to discuss certain questions pertaining to the status of the peacekeepers with Georgia, but "we feel very strongly that we cannot allow the introduction of a visa regime."

¶18. (C) Russia's other red line, according to Kelin, was the 1994 agreement setting up the JCC process for resolving the South Ossetia conflict and establishing the Joint Peacekeeping Force. Any move by Georgia to revise that would be unacceptable to Russia.

What About That Toast to Friendship?

¶19. (C) A/DCM recalled that DFM Karasin had told Ambassador Burns March 29 (reftel) that Russia was prepared to hold expert-level talks on Russia's ban of wine imports from Georgia (and Moldova) before the ban went into effect. But Chief Sanitary Doctor Onnishchenko had announced the ban and then gone on vacation. No talks had taken place, and the ban was in effect.

¶10. (C) Kelin reiterated the Russian position that the ban

was technical, not political. He blamed the lack of talks with Georgia on the fact that the Georgians had been "slower off the mark" than the Moldovans, who had immediately sent a delegation that now was engaged in talks with appropriate expert counterparts. (Note: The Moldovan delegation, headed by Economy Minister Lazar, arrived in Moscow March 28, the day after the ban started; their talks began a week later.) The Georgians, however, had not send a delegation from Tbilisi, and had wanted instead to address the issue through diplomatic contacts by the Georgian Embassy here. Russian health authorities would be prepared to hold talks with a delegation from Tbilisi once the current discussions with Moldova are finished, probably by the end of this week. Kelin said he had received that information late on April 3 from the Health Ministry and had passed it on to Russian Ambassador Chkhikvishvili in Tbilisi. Echoing a frequent theme, Kelin said Georgia's problems with Russia could be dealt with more readily if Georgian authorities were as quick to pursue contacts with Moscow as they were to "appeal to Mr. Bryza or Ambassador Tefft."

Comment

¶11. (C) Kelin made clear that Russia is willing to pursue improved relations with Georgia -- on its own terms and on a step-by-step basis. Its terms include Georgian restraint not only on "anti-Russian" rhetoric, but also on pressing on sensitive issues, central as they may be to Georgian goals. The wine import ban -- which all observers agree is politically motivated -- appears to be a message that Russia has means available to enforce its terms.

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